

Letter from Community Leaders

Dear Travis County and City of Austin Stakeholders,

We are musicians, venue owners, people who work in the music industry, community-based public health experts and providers, community activists, advocates, EMS workers, and citizens who have personal experience with a loved one who has used substances. We are writing this letter in support of commitments made by the the Travis County District Attorney's Office, Travis County Judge's Office, the Travis County Attorney's Office, and State Representatives Donna Howard and Gina Hinojosa and we urge other public officials and stakeholders to take similar action.

Right here in Travis County, there were 246 overdose related deaths in 2020 – a 30% increase from 2019. It was one of the leading causes of death in Travis County last year. Nationally, the number of overdose related deaths in 2020 marked the highest number of deaths ever recorded in a 12-month period. The risk of overdose in our community constitutes a significant threat to the public safety, public health, and economic health of our community and it must be addressed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased stress and trauma that has exacerbated the incidence of substance use in our communities, particularly in underserved communities. This growing public health crisis has touched all corners of our community and deserves a serious, unified, public health-based response.

Overdose deaths are a public health crisis and must be treated like one. We cannot arrest, jail, or prosecute our way out of this problem. Instead, we must increase public awareness of this serious issue, provide life-saving drugs and training to vulnerable communities, and ensure that appropriate resources and policies are available to support a community-based response. The commitments made by our local public officials are an important first step towards treating substance use disorder like the public health issue it is and saving lives in our community.

We are committed to joining with all local leaders and community partners to address this issue. We hope you will join us.

Cate Graziani, Co-Executive Director, Texas Harm Reduction Alliance

Patrick Buchta, Executive Director, Austin Texas Musicians

Darrin Acker, Executive Director, Communities for Recovery

Claire Zagorski, Pharmacy Addictions Research and Medicine Program Coordinator, The University of Texas at Austin

Cody Cowan, Executive Director, Red River Cultural District, Music Makes Austin, Music Venue Alliance Austin, The Amplified Sound Coalition, EQ Austin

Laura Elmore, LMSW-AP, Executive Director, Sobering Center\

Audrey Kuang, MD, Associate Director of Community Engagement and Health Equality,
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Matthew Hunt, APRN-FNP, CommUnityCare Street Medicine Team

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Sukyi McMahon, Senior Policy Director, Austin Justice Coalition

Selena Xie, President, Austin EMS Association

Harm Reduction Strategy

Last year in Travis County, drug related overdoses accounted for over 240 deaths – one of the leading causes of death in our community. Nationally, the number of overdose related deaths surged to over 100,000 during the last full year of the pandemic. Public health officials attribute the marked increase in overdose related deaths across the country to the instability caused by the pandemic, the increased prevalence of fentanyl, and insufficient access to medication and support.

In order to increase public safety in Travis County, we must work to address the root causes of harm in our county. Over the last eighteen months, the Covid-19 pandemic has devastated small businesses; increased the unemployment rate for communities of color; and shuttered schools, churches, and other institutions essential to the fabric of our community. The pandemic has increased instability for all of us – but has resulted in deep instability among underserved communities. And we know that instability makes us all less safe. There are simple steps public officials can, and should, take to attempt to save as many lives as possible here in Travis County.

Travis County public officials, including District Attorney Jose Garza; County Judge Andy Brown; County Attorney Delia Garza; State Representatives Donna Howard and Gina Hinojosa support a public health approach to reducing the number of overdose related deaths in Travis County that includes the following steps:

1. **Raise Awareness.** In 2020, over 240 people in our community lost their lives to drug-related overdoses. That represents a 30 percent increase from 2019 and was the second leading cause of accidental death in 2020. Accidental deaths as an overall category in Travis County in 2020 were only second to death by natural causes. Local public officials commit to partnering with impacted and vulnerable communities, community-based public health organizations, and law enforcement to raise awareness about the growing dangers of overdose in our county and availability of treatment for substance use disorder.
2. **Provide Training and Support.** Overdose related deaths in our community are preventable through proven public health approaches. The increased availability of life-saving medications like naloxone and trainings on overdose-avoidance strategies can save lives in our county. Finally, the data is clear that criminalization and incarceration only serves to increase the risk of overdose among people struggling with substance use disorder. Local public officials commit to partnering with impacted and vulnerable communities, community-based public health organizations, and law enforcement to ensure community-based trainings on overdose prevention are widely available.
3. **Provide Resources and Pursue Policy Change.** Public officials have a responsibility to ensure that sufficient resources are available to pursue community-based public health approaches to preventing overdoses. In addition, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the accidental ingestion of fentanyl is one of the leading drivers of the increase in overdose deaths for 2020. Changes in the law may be necessary to

ensure public officials and public health providers can make tools available, like fentanyl test strips, that can prevent the accidental ingestion of fentanyl. Accurate and timely data is necessary to pursue evidence-based solutions. Local Public Health Officials commit to increasing resources available for education, training, treatment, and life-saving medications like naloxone.

As our nation struggles to emerge from the deadliest pandemic in a century, public officials must address all the public health consequences of COVID-19 in our community. If we do that, we can begin to tackle the instability caused by the pandemic in our communities and that will make us all safer.